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The Social Nature of Instruction in a Mexican School: Implications for U.S. Classroom Practice

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Intervention designed to improve the schooling of language minority students in the U.S. has focused on selected areas of the learning experience. Depending on the grounding of the proposed improvement and its advocates, the call might be for curricular change to make the content of schooling more multicultural, for language development through bilingual education or ESL, for cooperative learning, or for some combination of these and still other approaches. The variety of proposals indicates at once the complex nature of school improvement and the need to consider all possible remedies to improve education for this student population. My purpose here is to support these kinds of efforts by

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sharing a finding in the area of classroom instructional process that resulted from an ethnographic case study of primary schooling in a rural Mexican community (Macias, 1990).

One of the results of my naturalistic inquiry was the observation of a particular social quality which permeated classroom life and, in particular, informally shaped instruction into a process of oral, interactive, and group oriented activity among students and teachers. Students in the *primaria* (1-6, primary school) where I conducted my observations, engaged in much talking and social behavior as they worked. Teachers not only tolerated but, in some ways, accommodated this kind of behavior for their own purposes. This pattern generally has not been observed as the norm in U.S. schools where a teacher-to-individual pupil and vice versa, task-oriented cycle of interaction predominates (Watson & Young, 1986). Within the latter kind of process, student behavior typically is constrained to the point that even questioning behavior, the essential building block of learning, tends to be dominated by teachers, inhibited in children (Comber, 1988), and poor in instructional utility (Barnes & Todd, 1977). The point is that in the U.S. only a narrow range of interaction normally occurs for instructional purposes and much less for social ends.

To the extent that Mexican and U.S. classroom instructional environments differ, both culture and school institutional elements are likely to be involved (Macias, 1990). For students, the problem in going between substantially different classroom milieus is one of discontinuity, the struggle of making a transition from one coherent socioculturally shaped institutional experience to a new one. For Mexican and other immigrant students in similar circumstances, the necessary struggle of adopting a new culture and language (Commins, 1989) is compounded by the necessity of functioning within new sociocultural classroom patterns, a task at which many students are not able to succeed.

In this article, I will present a particular social pattern of interaction as I observed it in the classrooms of one Mexican school and examine how it is rooted in classroom life as well as in the wider sociocultural milieu of the students and teachers. Recognizing that the successful education of students of diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds depends on the translation of knowledge to practice, I will conclude by discussing Mexican students' social behavior as a positive characteristic that ultimately can contribute to the creation of classroom settings for the effective teaching of these and other immigrant students in the U.S.

San Felipe: Immigrant-Sending Community and *Primaria*

The nondescript turnoff to San Felipe, Jalisco, a rural community of 1500, is about an hour's drive from Guadalajara. A bumpy six-kilometer ride over a gravel road ends at an isolated confluence of a riverbed and the sloping hills that provide runoff during the rainy season. While driving alongside the length of the riverbed, the village's "main street," one's progress is often halted by a herd of livestock being driven by men on horses or burros. In the early morning, a few women sweep their earth yards and the cobblestone road, while some men stand outside talking as they prepare to go work their *ejidos* (land parcels) or earn wages working for the larger landowners in the area. With its several small businesses meeting the local demand for groceries, household goods and agricultural supplies, as well as its church, middle school, and primary school, San Felipe is typical of communities of this size in this region of western Mexico. It is typical in yet another way—University of Guadalajara researchers have identified San Felipe as a migrant sending community (Arroyo, 1986), in a region from which large numbers of the population migrate to both Mexican cities and employment centers in the U.S. (Bustamante, 1977; Cornelius, 1984).

Contrary to the static, pastoral impression of a first-time visitor, the village of San Felipe actually is a transnationally mobile community, a cell within the Mexico-U.S. immigration infrastructure. The primary causes of Mexican immigration today are found in structural, economic problems that have been compounded by a chronic foreign debt crisis. These problems include continual price inflation, periodic government currency devaluations, and deep recession, which for many precludes the possibility of gainful work. It is within this economic context that individuals and families—with school-age children—from San Felipe, and countless other villages, towns, and cities, migrate to the U.S. in search of the work, security, and mobility increasingly unavailable to them in Mexico. Consequently, *migración* (the general rubric by which Mexicans refer to both emigration and immigration) is an important element of the local community. The extent of this phenomenon was indicated by a teacher who once reminded me of this common Mexican saying: "Every Mexican family has a member in the United States."

The San Felipe *primaria* (1-6 primary school) is located at the far end of the village, behind the towering cathedral and on a sloping, dirt road leading to another nearby community. The school consists of four buildings, one constructed of relatively newer brick, the rest, in an older stucco style. The brick building houses three classrooms; the stuccos, two each. A large tree shades a paved yard that serves as the main entry area to the buildings, while to their right is a paved volleyball court. Still further uphill, to the right, are the school restrooms and two houses. The entire compound is surrounded by a simple adobe-stucco wall

and wrought iron fence.

Inside, the third-grade classroom is typically representative of the other eight, furnished with four rows of roughly-hewn desks, their benches designed to seat two. The teacher's desk occupies the front corner of the room away from the door. The front wall is dominated by a green 1m x 2m chalkboard. Just above it is a small Mexican flag, and to the left on a long strip of paper is the alphabet, in upper and lower cases. In the corner, behind the teacher's desk is posted the *Cuadro de Sequencia y Alcance*, a chart in which the year's curricular units, objectives, and time schedule are all outlined. Posted on the rear wall are some large pieces of paper on which children's names are charted with gold stars for completed work. Other than this chart and a couple of left-over Christmas decorations, the rest of the wall is bare. At this primary school 9 full-time teachers and a full-time director are responsible for the schooling of approximately 350 children ranging in age from 7 to 14. Class sizes typically number in the thirties, with the smallest groups in the low twenties and the largest, over forty.

Social Dimensions of Instruction in the San Felipe *Primaria*

Instruction in the San Felipe *primaria* is a dynamic process marked by the active participation of students and teachers. The main elements in this process are teacher, student, and a textbook for each learner provided *gratis* by the *Secretaria de Educación Pública* (SEP), the nationally standardized school system serving most rural areas of Mexico. A teacher's manual provides explicit lesson plans and suggestions for instruction, while students regularly use "Scribe" brand notebooks purchased by their parents. The chalkboard and an occasional hand-crafted article complete the list of instructional aids; these simply are not provided by the financially strapped SEP system.

Teachers directed instruction by focusing their activity on textbook content, much of which was presented in narrative form. These texts not only serve to introduce and describe concepts, but also provide content for lessons, projects, and activities through which teachers can explain, develop, and reinforce the ideas. They are, in a sense, the basis for all classroom interaction. This observational fieldnote illustrates the instructional use of a fourth grade narrative:

> Teacher recites a passage, *Agua Que Viaja* (Water That Travels), out of the textbook. It is about two thirds of a page long. After this she reads another passage of one half page, *Las Nubes Que Veo Pasar* (The Clouds I See Pass By). They go into the first exercise, in which students are to choose which passage they liked best and to think of the reasons for their choices. Next exercise involves three sentences the teacher has put on board. The sentences

refer to ideas presented in the narratives, e.g., clouds, water. She has students identify nouns, which she underlines for them. Then she circles articles, explaining that these give use the gender and number in the *sustantivos* (nouns)— *"Son palabritas que dan el número y el género en el sustantivo."* She then lists all the articles on the board and asks the group to give the correct article for the words she calls out: water, clouds, river. At the end of the period, teacher gives the assignment to follow the recreation break. It will be to write a list of ten nouns, using their articles to give gender and number. She borrows a Scribe Notebook, shows them how this should look, and also tells the students that tomorrow they will take turns reading and writing about their favorite excerpts.

While teachers are involved in much presentation and direction based on the textbooks and teacher guides, the scarcity of other instructional resources may provide, in a curious way, an initial condition for wider expressions of interactivity in the classroom. I turn now to some illustrations of how instruction additionally was characterized by high levels of social interaction throughout.

A salient characteristic of instruction in the *primaria* was its oral, group-interactive quality. Beyond teachers' textbook-based presentations described above, students talked seemingly at will throughout the class period. Teachers were continually available to repeat, explain, and motivate. Silent seat work was rare, and often a crescendo of sound—some noise, to be sure—was indicative of instructional activity. The following observation of a first grade classroom illustrates this pattern of vocal-physical activity.

As she instructs children to glue sheets of paper in their books and write several consonant-vowel pairs, the teacher sometimes shouts her directions to compete with the clamor of kids asking for glue, repeating instructions to each other, sharing small toys, sharpening pencils, asking to go to the bathroom, etc. This activity and "noise" are compounded by the large number in the classroom, 35, but things somehow seem to get done by some, if not all, students. Then the teacher has the children recite the word pairs taped to the chalkboard. They shout these out loudly as a group as she points to each combination with an old broken broom handle. Sometimes she calls out the pairs in order; other times, out of order to check their attention. Then she calls individual children to the board, gives them the stick, they choose a pair of sounds, but then have to pronounce them loudly and quickly as she presses them for correct responses.

Although classroom activity was not always as busy as in the above passage, a stream of sociable student interaction was an inherent part of the classroom environment.

Sometimes, student vocalization came about by design, as teachers frequently asked for assertive student responses. Several times, I saw teachers call for increasingly louder group response from their students, as in the following third grade lesson on fractions.

> Determining the answer is a group process. First, the teacher solicits the group for the right answer. Once she recognizes the student with the right answer more of the group join in with the correct response. Teacher then asks them to repeat:
>
> *¿Cuántos?* ("How many?" teacher asks in loud voice)
> *Cinco!* ("Five!" students answer loudly)
> *¿Cinco qué??* ("Five what?" she exhorts, even louder)
> *Cinco quintos!!* ("Five-fifths!!" kids shout excitedly)

Sometimes even designated individual tasks become loudly group oriented. Once, a sixth-grade teacher called on a boy to sketch and solve a geometry problem on the chalkboard, instructing the rest of the class to copy the problem in their Scribe notebooks while the young man worked. Nevertheless, both students and teacher gave him feedback as he worked, called out errors, miscalculations, alternative operations, and so forth. It became more of a group brainstorming project, a kind of unstructured collaboration, rather than the individual task initially called for.

Students become involved in the instructional process in another active way. Parts of each textbook are actually designed to be used as a workbook with examples, pictures, figures, or other graphics supplementing the lesson at hand. But a virtual absence of extra instructional materials requires students to construct their own aids to enhance the majority of tasks. Teachers explain to the students how to make the aids, and the textbooks clearly illustrate how the end product should look.

> Lesson for today is Midiendo Con Fracciones (measuring with fractions). Students draw and cut out of their Scribe notebooks two strips of paper which they then divide by a series of hashmarks into parts. These strips, which are to be used as rulers, are called *decimetros* (decimeters) by the teacher. One strip is divided into fifths, the other, into eighths.

Another time, fourth grade students made their own compasses by tracing and cutting them out, and following the model depicted in their textbooks.

These various hands-on activities are an inherent part of daily instruction, providing continual opportunities for students to work and interact with each other in the collaborative, social mode I have described. What's more, teachers then put the products of these efforts to good instructional use in, for example, the use of student-constructed graphics and three-dimensional models to aid

their teaching.

In summary, teachers directed the instructional process in this general sequence: (a) explicit, detailed presentation of task and directions, typically involving reading of narrative text, (b) elicitation of group and individual (often becoming group) student response, and (c) scribe notebook exercises or other projects requiring visual and hands-on student creativity. High levels of interaction characterized the instructional exchange between teachers and students, as well as among students. Put another way, teachers formally directed the instructional process, but informally motivated student activity and collaboration. Talk and interchange throughout formed the social basis of that process.

The fact that the typical San Felipe classroom consists of a roomful of loud, interacting kids—of the nine classrooms I observed, eight tended toward this pattern—can be examined within a variety of explanations based in factors located in and beyond the classroom. A primary consideration is class size. Students in the smaller classes numbered in the low twenties (6th grade), while the lower grades often had groups of 35 and up, with 43 in the single third grade classroom the largest of these. As class size increases we might expect diminished teacher control due to more student talking and movement—a louder "steady roar," but vocal interaction typified all but one of eight classrooms, regardless of size.

Other reasons for loud classrooms were expressed by one teacher who said she used group recitation and "sounding out" in language arts so that students will learn, and by other teachers who held another informant's view:

> Have you noticed that we try to get them to communicate, to be able to speak in front of a group? We do that because it's a great need out here in the rural areas. . . . it's good for them not to be embarrassed or shy to speak in public. I tell them, "Louder, I want to hear you!"

These teachers thus expect loud, vocal expression from students to enhance both their own teaching and the students' socialization. They called for it in specific instructional contexts, such as presenting in front of the group or reading aloud, but they also tolerated a high level of spontaneous verbal communication, physical expression and movement, and noise throughout the day. With one exception, the teachers I observed did not display a need for constant control of either classroom activity or sound level. Although they were quite capable of taking disciplinary action, as in the few instances of student disruptive behavior when I did hear teachers cry "ENOUGH!," they were not visibly preoccupied with maintaining constant silence. Teachers' tolerance was due perhaps to an underlying interest in seeing active, responsive, even loud students involved in learning, rather than a withdrawn, unresponsive, and disengaged group.

In considering these San Felipe *primaria* classroom patterns, I have concluded that their oral, interactive character simply reflects, to some extent, the norms of a society still based largely in oral communication. Of course, much of the Mexican population is literate (Unesco, 1988). The Mexican government supports literacy development through nonschool SEP projects, and mass and electronic communication also are widespread in Mexico, but the discourse of everyday life for most Mexicans is found in face-to-face, oral communication. Particularly in rural areas like San Felipe, people still visit and chat with their neighbors, shop and banter with local shopkeepers, and small-talk, gossip, commiserate, and joke as they work alongside their friends. Mexican television offers little of interest to school-age children who are normally outside playing, laughing, and talking. Thus the particular patterns of task organization (group orientation), communication (oral emphasis), and interpersonal behavior (direct, interactive) which characterize the daily life of the *primaria* correspond closely to qualities of life existing in the local community—primary, face-fo-face social relations that students and teachers bring to and reconstruct in the school setting.

Translating Sociocultural Insight to Practice

Large numbers of transfer students from Mexican schools come into U.S. schools with a predisposition to learn within a socially oriented instructional milieu as described above. This is not an inborn or "natural" disposition, but it is learned in settings such as home, community, and school in which face-to-face, oral interactivity is normal social discourse. This idea may challenge the current thinking of many educators who may be all too familiar with the stereotypical, but real, pattern of initial reticence often shown by students of Mexican or other ethnic origins (Genishi, 1989). However, this is also a socially influenced outcome which has been shown to occur in contexts where factors such as cultural unfamiliarity, lack of communicative confidence, and social stress inhibit the performance of students in situations such as those demanded by school. A "Mexicans are quiet" stereotype (or another language group and characteristic) based on observations of a narrow range of social conditions, belies the range of language ability possessed by the vast majority of all students of any group who are given the opportunity to use and develop their communication skills.

In the case of the students I observed in Mexico, the formation of their oral-socially oriented dispositions begins in the family, whose structure and socialization process remains intact after immigration. Observers of Mexican

immigrant students in their homes typically report this setting as providing the following:

"rich environments for a variety of language uses in Spanish," and "a constant stream of people passed through these living rooms where, along with more mundane family gossip, world politics, the problems of undocumented workers, and the difficulty of obtaining English lessons were all among the topics of discussion" (Commins, 1989, p. 30).

Within their presently defined professional role, most teachers find it difficult to visit and observe in any systematic way the experiences of their students at home or in their communities. Unless individual efforts are made to overcome it, this situation naturally limits an understanding of how students do use language to communicate effectively and creatively (Commins, 1989). This situation is further compounded by the typical, large-group classroom structure which also limits teachers' appreciation of the full range of student abilities (Steinberg & Cazden, 1979). But even with a reduction of these barriers, awareness of and sensitivity toward differences in sociocultural background alone are limited in their direct benefit to teachers or the student populations involved. New skills (Olguin, 1988) and instructional strategies (Commins, 1989) which adapt and apply this knowledge are needed.

What benefits are possible if classroom instruction were geared to accommodate such student predisposition for active social behavior? The issue initially is basic for students who are socially or culturally displaced in a regular classroom, because positive social interaction is the first step in coping with the isolation and alienation initially felt in this kind of situation. All students naturally are inclined to see school as one of the primary settings for their social life:

> Many of the student-student and student-teacher classroom interactions are based on students' desire to socialize. These interactions usually concern non-academic matters and take the forms of talking, joking about out-of-class interests, and playful behaviors. These are intrinsically motivated interactions and are related to students' desires to create an enjoyable classroom experience (Allen, 1986, p. 446).

Social relations in school are thus doubly important for immigrant students, first, as a form of initial psychological security and social acceptance in a new situation and, second, as the normal business of development through peer relations. Fortunately, specific techniques such as the "teambuilding" and "classbuilding" of cooperative learning (Kagan, 1989) are available for addressing these socialization issues in the classroom.

Equally important instructional outcomes are also to be expected, beginning with the engagement of students as active classroom participants. A clear

illustration of this issue is seen in the phenomenon in which students who sit toward the front of a traditional classroom tend to get more and better instructional attention, are more involved, and do better academically than those sitting in the back row. This is an indication of the effect of social inclusion on learning. Similarly, an instructional environment designed to accommodate, rather than inhibit, peer and student-teacher interaction comprises the basis of the inclusion of all students as active classroom members. From the student perspective, in fact, a class in which learning and social interaction are linked is preferable (Allen, 1986). An improved learning experience is the ultimate outcome made possible through active engagement among students and teachers. Recently proven strategies such as enhancement of questioning skills (Brown & Palincsar, 1986; Comber, 1988; Lehr, 1985) small-group work (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Watson & Young, 1986), cooperative learning (Kagan, 1989; Slavin, 1990), and other formalized interactive approaches are possible only within the freedom of a classroom social organization such as the one being explored here.

The most important educational outcome for immigrant students in this kind of interactive environment will be in the area of language development—the key to all instruction and learning. For teachers and their students still learning it, English is a complex but essential task to be mastered. Teachers initially must be aware of the diversity students show not only across, but within language groups (Wong Fillmore, 1983). While Mexican students may previously have grown up and been schooled in the kind of oral, interactive setting described above, their initial entry into a U.S. school may be marked by the inhibition of language use, in English, during the acquisition period (Genishi, 1989), but in some cases, this inhibition may even occur in their home language, a situation which threatens the development of meaningful classroom communication in any medium.

In the majority of cases, however, students will use one or both languages in the form and to the extent permitted by their own abilities and classroom norms. For instance, students may use the modest amount of English they know for instructional communications with the teacher, while using Spanish in greater amounts for social communication with their peers (Commins, 1989). A key point here is that students' engagement in classroom activity is enhanced when communication about both instructional and social concerns is part of the classroom instructional plan. In this light, active communication skills already in place in one language can be used as the basis for their development in another (Lucas & Borders, 1987), and a strategy such as the use of heterogeneous-homogeneous teams for LEP student language development is a specific example of how this transition can be structured through cooperative learning

(Kagan, 1989). The issue of dual language skills development is certainly complex, but given a range of skills and styles across languages and individuals, classrooms providing a diversity of settings (Genishi, 1989; Moll, 1988) in which instruction can be structured, social purposes accommodated, and student talk and interaction encouraged, hold much promise of involving students in the learning process.

The logical argument for more interactivity in classroom instruction, however, does not make its introduction in the classroom a simple or straightforward matter. For instance, most teachers are continually involved in developing their idea of the ideal classroom, based on their own, often traditional training and experience, involving teacher as lecturer and student as passive learner. Individual teacher preferences, their understandings of students and their parents, institutional constraints, and so forth, influence classroom atmosphere. With a traditional classroom milieu in place, however, teachers initially may be concerned about introducing a new environment in which students are freer to move around, ask questions, and interact more in keeping with their own pace, rather than keeping a rigid organizational structure. All teachers must have professional autonomy and a right to control their responsibilities as teachers. Such autonomy and control actually are enhanced in an interactive, cooperative learning classroom into which instructional advantages and various solutions to both student and teacher problems can be built (Kagan, 1989).

Mexican students' past instructional experiences in the informal social milieu of the Mexican classroom are ripe for transfer into the formalized cooperative learning environments currently enjoying increasing interest in U.S. schools. Cooperative and other interactive approaches recognize that the teaching/ learning process is transactional in nature (Watson & Young, 1986) and can provide the opportunity for expressive talk (Adams, 1984), mutual assistance (Comber, 1988), and social support. These are instructionally related experiences which many teachers already support for all students, and a social organization facilitating them among those with a particular predisposition to these promises to be an enhancement, rather than a detriment, to both the teachers' task and students' learning (Kagan, 1989). To be sure, the vocal, collective orientation in Mexican classrooms examined here is but one facet of the complex task of classroom instruction, but its immediate implications make this culturally shaped behavior pattern worthy of further study and practical development in U.S. classrooms.

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